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HOW CAN THE UNIVERSITY BE OF MORE HELP TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL ?¹

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The university can be of most help to the high school by raising the standard of entrance requirements in English. This has been done by the university in some other departments. Applicants for the law and medical courses have to fulfil today requirements which ten years ago would have stopped at the beginning a horde of pettifoggers and quacks. One principal of my acquaintance refuses to certify for admission to the Cornell Engineering School unless the high-school graduate has made above 90 per cent in mathematics, confident that in the long run this insistence on high attainment will benefit his entire mathematical department. A complete acceptance of this position in other departments will do more to advance the standard of high-school studies than anything else I can now bring to mind, except, perhaps, the securing of better faculties and more capable, enthusiastic teaching as the return for higher salaries.

Of course, it is quite true that high schools do not exist merely to prepare pupils for college. Their primary aim—and the representatives of the universities will permit me to say this—their most important aim is training for good citizenship. By this test of an ever-rising standard our high schools are now being judged. A mother wails that her daughter does not care for good books; a father finds fault because his son has been taught to make a clay elephant if he feels in the mood for doing it, though he cannot express himself intelligently, nor cipher accurately; and *Life* prints as “News of the Day, as It Ought to Be,” this item:

A recent experiment in one of our public schools has been watched with great interest by many people. In this school the children have been taught

¹ Read before the Missouri Society of Teachers of English at Columbia, May 4, 1912.

to read, write, and cipher before learning civics, botany, trigonometry, and lattice work. The originality of the experiment is beyond question, but whether it will be favorably received by the people as a whole remains in great doubt.

Stover at Yale offers the scene in which the breezy young Westerner berates his classmates because they have read and thought to so little benefit and advantage. Of course much of this would not concern the English course at all were it not that this department is not only responsible for training in reading, composition, and literary history, but must also serve as a clearing-house for papers on every topic under the sun, and a few beyond. Many history departments teach the facts and let the critical discussions and inferences come out in papers prepared as English compositions; current topics are as frequently discussed in English as in economics and sociology, and every teacher of English is expected—and willing—to read about marconigrams and the evolution of ions. In reality every teacher of English is forced to develop into a modern Herr Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, and, if the truth were revealed in faculty rosters, would deserve to have printed opposite his name, *Professor der Allerlei Wissenschaft*. The restricted and competitive world of business exacts from its leaders and employees efficient speaking and writing, and these demands force every pupil who knows that he is going to enter this field to be extremely careful about his acquisition, retention, and use of words and expressions.

In the main, teachers of English gladly welcome these advanced standards. Mere pride in themselves, if not confidence in their ability, would induce them to want to secure better results this year than last, to hope that within their own lifetime fourth-year high-school English will be the equivalent of present-day college Freshman English. In education, as in life itself; in study, as in business; it is the goal that determines the course. Let entrance to college demand a higher intellectual level than it demands today; let it require a fuller knowledge of the most powerful energizing force we possess, our English language, and note how quickly the advanced standard will be attained by youths who now complain of weekly themes and supplementary reading. Certainly this contention is sustained by several definite instances. Universities

which allow exemptions from examinations in all other subjects never exempt in English courses. Dartmouth, having warned the student body that a fixed standard in scholarship must be reached, this mid-year dismissed sixty Freshmen and Sophomores, and even dropped five Juniors. The *Alumni Magazine* declares, "It is unlikely that such inclusively drastic action will again be necessary." This statement is true. When the medical schools of the universities advanced their entrance requirements the alumni who count noses and bodies as indications of greatness deplored the backward move of the administrations. Only for a short time did any school suffer in numbers, and now those same carpers are boasting of the stand for pure scholarship made by their independent institutions. Merely printing at the top of examinations this sentence, "No candidate will be accepted in English whose work is notably defective in point of spelling, punctuation, idiom, or division into paragraphs," marked a decided advance over the former idea that merely because a boy could answer questions of fact concerning books he had read, he was therefore capable of attempting work in college. In the reworded form of this warning I see, perhaps erroneously, another advance: "However accurate in subject-matter, no paper will be considered satisfactory if seriously defective in punctuation, spelling, or other essentials of good usage."

This brings us directly to college-entrance requirements. One cannot dismiss this phase by saying that no person is forced to enter college, and that if he does not like the terms offered him he may go elsewhere, because no institution of learning would take such an attitude. On the other hand the high school cannot blatantly declare that its graduates have done their best and that they must be admitted to college with no question by the authorities as to their fitness. Every college professor will frankly admit that students receive degrees without being fully equipped for research work, let us say; and every honest high-school principal will refuse at times to recommend a pupil for college entrance without examination. There must admittedly be some test. "But no partial, narrow, contracted, pinched, occasional system will be at all suitable to such an object."

In classic languages the high-school texts are decided by a con-

ventional agreement of what the graduate shall have done before attempting Freshman Latin and Greek. In modern languages the choice is naturally wide. The English requirements stand between these two, and now afford excellent chances to test an applicant's knowledge and ability, offering a wide and varied choice among definite prescriptions. If an education implies acquaintance with good books—and this phase must be emphasized today when desultory reading and pseudo-literary badinage tempt the young impressionable mind to less worthy products—then some such list must always be held up as the framework of a liberal mind. If one study this enumeration, he will feel less inclined to speak of it as a list—forty items from which ten are to be offered for examination; after this year (1913-15) practically the same number, but the selection marked by a wider historic range, and a proportionate diversity of form and material.

Though the making of reading lists is a delightful pastime, and though the deplorable condition of a reader wrecked on an island with a case of books carefully selected by him for others has been pathetically depicted by a librarian in a recent volume, the fact remains that for adolescents choices must always be made. Last week a father told of a woman who had packed into her eighteen-year-old son's trunk before he went back to college a certain book, making the boy promise that he would induce all the young men of his acquaintance to read it. There was a storm of protests from all the parents. You will understand why when you know that the volume contained three plays by Brieux. A pupil may not find in *The Pilgrim's Progress* the same interest he finds in *The Jungle Book*. He should not. But for such a reason to discard Bunyan is as wrong as to allow a boy to pass over imaginary quantities in algebra merely because he intends to be a civil engineer and will deal only with applied mathematics; or to let a girl who intends to do magazine illustrating omit the wheel and pulley from school physics. We must not let the pupil run the danger of missing an acquaintance with *one* of the essentials of general culture. He may not be "taking" literature, but he must be exposed to it. "Perhaps *The House of Seven Gables* seems a little dry in the first few chapters," writes a boy after seven weeks in the high school,

"but it grows more and more interesting as one reads it." We teachers know that that boy's mind was developing as he read this romance and that he was really unconsciously feeling the charm and power of Hawthorne. A girl added a different critical note: "From the start it is not interesting to read, but as you get farther along you find some interesting point which has its conclusion in the next chapter, and there you find a new point; until you get so interested that you think you are reading the best book you ever read."

Yet teachers have informed me that Hawthorne is too far above children of fourteen and fifteen. So is Goethe's *Faust* above most people who read it. But the attempts to master both are worth all the trouble and effort one must expend. We all deplore, with Professor Münsterberg, the showy, novel methods we have to resort to in order to attract involuntary attention in the classroom. We wonder whether our demands are not above the capacity. Sometimes we receive startling confirmation of our cherished opinions from least expected sources. A graduate recently came back from Princeton, and when I asked him what I could do for the boys going to college, he gave me the best advice I have received in years: "Soak it to 'em in English."

In advocating the raising of the standard of college English I do not ask that the amount required of the high-school pupil be increased. We know that both pupils and teachers have quite enough now; in fact so far as composition alone is concerned, teachers have too much work. I ask that the college insist on a greater facility in speaking and writing; a skill in discriminating between the good expression and the better one; a familiarity with the best usage—the familiarity which breeds, not contempt, but content; an intimate knowledge of books read; a critically comparative estimate of literary execution.

What results will follow from such a procedure as here requested? First of all, college graduates themselves will be better trained, and if they become high-school teachers will bring to their profession a knowledge, a skill, a prestige, and best of all, a love and regard for English that will be exacting, and an enthusiasm, contagious in spite of all precautions. We should hope that the

faculties ten years hence will be better than the present ones, for we all want to believe that the faculties to which we now belong are better than they were a decade ago, even though we were members of them at that time. These better equipped teachers will be better able, gradually at first, then rapidly, but always effectively, to direct a pupil's energy toward his own self-cultivation in English. When the high schools meet the advanced requirements of the colleges, the lower grades will be forced to meet the high-school standards. This is inevitable and absolutely fitting. Every teacher who has come in contact with pupils fresh from the lower schools must feel that more consistent training can be done with children. For this, also, the teachers' training must be raised, and teachers' colleges must not propagate such errors—to cite a trifling illustration—as the use of a legitimate punctuation mark, the parenthesis, to indicate in manuscript the omission of a word or passage. The St. Louis Teachers' college has made an advance. It will no longer admit all graduates from its own high schools. This year the entrant must have stood during her Senior year in the upper two-thirds of her class; in 1913 she must have been for two years, and after that, for four years, within the upper two-thirds of her class. Otherwise she must take examinations.

Thus the breezes of discussion and interest are gently stirring and the little straws are moving restlessly this way and that; soon, I believe, they will all go whirling on in a single direction, and then we shall see that those straws indicate that the breezes have increased into a steady wind of change for a high degree of efficiency. For the teacher of English all this means alteration, activity, unceasing work, eternal vigilance that brings little liberty, but before him he can keep his eyes on a single phrase of a cultured English novelist who gave to the educator in fiction some of the noble rôles he plays in life itself, for George Meredith described the school teacher "as ploughing to make a richer world."